A MOMENTOUS STEP RETRACED

THIRTEEN years ago, when the World War was blazing up to its height, the United Grand Lodge of England took a step that aroused a good deal of criticism and caused genuine regret in this country. This was the exclusion of members of English lodges who were of German or Austrian birth, and a declaration of non-recognition and non-intercourse with the Grand Lodges of enemy countries. The then editor of THE BUILDER spoke of it "with mingled sorrow and amazement." The amazement has long since passed, but the sorrow and regret have remained.

The members of the English Grand Lodge were by no means unanimous in this decision. The resolution was forcibly opposed, and the minority was a large one. This shows that in spite of the provocation - and provocation there certainly was - many of our English brethren felt it would establish a most unfortunate precedent.

We will briefly recapitulate the circumstances. First, the German Grand Lodges had, in very arrogant terms, repudiated the idea of universality in the Craft, and had severed all connection with the Masonry in the allied countries. But this, though unpleasant, did not raise any question as regarding brethren of German birth who were English Masons; and there were many such.

The real cause of complaint was the behavior of these brethren, behavior that was un-Masonic to a very high degree. It was not their loyalty to their country, their desire to serve it in any way, even by espionage. There is nothing reprehensible in this. If we are just, we must recognize that a German civilian was as noble and self-sacrificing in risking his life to obtain information for the government of his country as Englishmen and Frenchmen were in doing likewise - and many did. The difficulty was that the German brethren insisted on bringing the subject of the war into the lodges.

It sounds rather incredible. but we have it on the best of authority that it was true, not only here and there, but almost generally. What was difficult to understand, and is still obscure, is why the ordinary, normal machinery of Masonic discipline could not have fully met the case. To do anything to disturb the harmony of a lodge is a recognized offense, one that the Master has full power to take cognizance of summarily. Any brother refusing to submit is thereby contumacious and liable to exclusion on that ground alone. And action along such lines so far from creating a bad precedent, would have strengthened a good one.

Originally particular lodges had the power to exclude anyone who was persona non grata to a majority of the members, and the right was frequently exercised. Such exclusion did not affect the brother's standing generally, it left him much in the position of a dimitted Mason among ourselves. But lodges, both in England and America, have been progressively shorn of their powers until they are approaching the stage of being little more than the agencies of Grand Lodges with no other function than that of running candidates through the "degree mill." It is a melancholy lesson of history that rights once lost are seldom or never regained.

Instead of reviving and strengthening the old powers of the individual lodges, and encouraging them to take such action as seemed best to fit individual cases, and thus putting the matter on the eminently Masonic ground of maintaining peace and harmony in the lodge, without specific reference to any particular cause of irritation or disturbance of fraternal feelings, it appeared to be necessary to make an ad hoc rule along lines which, at the very best, were contrary to the great ideal of the Craft, universal brotherhood.

It was all the more unfortunate because the whole Masonic world is affected, willingly or unwillingly, by the action of the Grand Lodge of England. Englishmen are reputed to have many faults and failings, but impulsive and resentful action is not looked for from them. And when they do act in that way it has a very far reaching effect. In this case, we cannot help feeling, a very unfortunate one.

It is now ten years since the war ended, nine since the treaty of peace was made, and this resolution has at last been rescinded. It is now open to the English lodges to restore such of their excluded members as they may unanimously choose.

During this period, so we are informed, the lodges holding of the Grand Lodge of England have been forbidden to admit to Masonic intercourse brethren whom no one would have dreamed of wanting to exclude. In some cases, so we are informed, these brethren, though born in Germany or Austria, had lived their whole lives under the British flag, had served in some cases in British armies, whose sons fought in the Great War for their father's adopted country, and indeed in some cases have been honored by British Governments for services rendered. It certainly seems time that such an injustice was remedied, if remedied it can be.

The German Grand Lodges have received much reprobation for their action in breaking off fraternal relations. But in following their example we have condoned their action. In any case we ought now to be free enough from war-bred passion and prejudice to be able to see that this action was really inevitable, practically speaking, on their part. Indeed it might with truth be said that it was compulsory. Aside from the pressure of mass sentiment, which was so fully organized and exploited in pre-war Germany, they would have been suspect in the eyes of their own government had they not taken the step they did. Under the circumstances it is not fair to blame them. We might have admired them more had they made themselves martyrs for the Masonic ideal, but we have no right to demand that they should have done so, even had we also been willing to sacrifice everything for that ideal - it is far from certain that we should.

One thing, however, remains. The actions of Grand Lodges have not always the importance they seem to have. Practically, and in effect, all relations between the Grand Lodges of the combatant countries were severed by the existence of a state of war. Declarations of non-intercourse were really no more than rubricating and underlining the unfortunate fact. These declarations had little or no effect on the actions of individual Masons. The present writer can vouch from personal knowledge that German Masons did in many cases aid and assist enemy brothers so far as lay in their power. Undoubtedly the reverse was also true, though of that he cannot speak so certainly. Thus in reality the formal action was not much more than what the French would call a "facade." Behind that screen individual Masons were fulfilling their obligations with little regard to the thunders of official excommunication.

We have sometimes thought that if the chief priests and rulers of our particular synagogues could be thrown for a time into the stress and danger of flood and field, battle and murder and shipwreck, destitution and starvation, and had personal experience of the workings of Masonry in such circumstances, that many questions would be seen in an altogether new light, and that some obstacles to the ideal of universality would not appear so insurmountable as they seem to do at present.

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